

~~SECRET~~

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

13 January 1958

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

SUBJECT: Thai Problems and Prospects*

DOCUMENT NO. 1
NO CHANGE IN CLASS. ☐
☒ DECLASSIFIED
CLASS. CHANGED TO: TS S C
NEXT REVIEW DATE: _____
AUTH: STAT
DATE: 21 APR 1980 REVIEWER: 019645

A. Politics

1. A virtually complete change in top Thai leadership has occurred since the publication of NIE 62-57 last June. The estimate did not foresee the specific developments surrounding this change: Sarit's coup, the flights abroad of Phibun and Phao, Sarit's incapacitating illness, and the new government of Lt. General Thanom. However, events to date have not called into question NIE 62-57's basic estimate that the nature of Thai government or its domestic and foreign policies would not change radically, at least in the short run, in the event of a shift in the top leadership.

* This memorandum has been discussed with representatives of OCI and D/DP. The current estimate on Thailand is NIE 62-57, "Probable Developments in Thailand," dated 18 June 1957. A new NIE is presently scheduled for June 1958.

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

2. Many traditional, and a few unique and promising, features have been revealed in the turmoil of Thai politics of the past six months. The December Assembly elections demonstrated continued military dominance of politics, apathy on the part of the Thai electorate at large, and popular response to personalities rather than to parties. The National Socialist Party, formed by Sarit in December, is to a degree a recreation of the Seri Managkhasila (SMP), the Phibun-Phao-Sarit government party which dominated Thai politics in the months just prior to Sarit's coup. Nevertheless, the National Socialist Party presently appears to be a much looser and less disciplined alliance than the SMP. The December elections were remarkably more honest than the Phao-rigged national elections of February 1957. In addition, leftist candidates lost heavily in the December elections, indicating the Bangkok electorate's disregard of its vocal, leftist press, and the absence as yet of well-organized anti-American and anti-SEATO sentiment. Sarit and the new Premier, Thanom, have announced that Assembly by-elections, long-postponed, will in fact begin to take place in April 1958, even though most of the 26 seats immediately at stake are presently in opposition (conservative, Democrat Party) strongholds. These, and subsequent, by-elections are designed gradually to replace Second Category (appointed) members with First Category (elected) representatives,

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

a process promised by the government to be completed by 1962.*

3. These promising developments have been overtaken, however, by the illness of Sarit, who will shortly proceed to the US for medical care. Sarit has been supreme until now, but he is without question seriously ill. In his absence, political power will rest largely in the hands of his two chief lieutenants, premier Thanom and Lt. General Praphat. Unless Sarit should recover and return from the US to resume active direction of Thai politics, political power will probably gravitate toward the untested Thanom and Praphat, with the rivalry between them becoming the chief political problem immediately facing Thailand.

4. Although their respective power positions will become clearer after the departure of Sarit for the US, a balance between the two seems to exist at the moment. Thanom is Premier, Minister of Defense, Assistant (to Sarit) Commander-in-Chief of the Army, and commander of the Army's

* The Assembly currently has 283 members. Of these, 123 are Second Category (nearly all selected by Sarit), and 160 are First Category. 108 of the 160 elected members have generally pro-government party affiliations. Sarit's newly-organized National Socialist Party will try to unite the appointed members and the pro-government elected members under its banner. The largest opposition group in the Assembly are the Democrats, with 39 seats.

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

First Area, which includes Bangkok. Praphat is a deputy Premier, Minister of Interior, Secretary General of the National Socialist (government) Party, and commander of the 1st Army Division, which garrisons the city of Bangkok. Both are able military men. Thanom is of a retiring nature and apparently accepted the Premiership against his will and only at Sarit's bidding. Thanom is nevertheless a quietly effective operator and may be able to balance off the more aggressive Praphat. Meanwhile, there seems to be no immediate threat to Thanom's apparent leadership of the present cabinet which, incidentally, is constructed to preserve dominance of the military while providing for key representation of both Royal and political party figures.* For the immediate future, Thanom and Praphat will probably seek to consolidate their new positions and gains, while watching the health and political fortunes of their chief, Sarit. The seeds nevertheless appear present for a possible renewal of a Phao-Sarit type of struggle, with a new cast of characters.

* The principal Royal representative is Prince Wan, concurrently a deputy Premier and Minister of Foreign Affairs. The principal party figure is Nai Sukit Nimmanhem (leader of Sarit-formed Unionist Party of elected Assemblymen, recently amalgamated into National Socialist Party), concurrently a deputy Premier and Minister of Economic Affairs.

Thanom's cabinet is essentially the same as the preceding provisional government of Pote Sarasin, except for the addition of five (non-military) Ministers Without Portfolio.

~~SECRET~~

5. Whatever the allocations or shifts of power in the top leadership, the short-term prospect is for continuing dominance of Thai politics by the Sarit-picked junta of younger military officers, though possibly with some increase in government responsibility and respectability. Opposition in the Assembly from Khuang and his Democrat Party may have a beneficial effect on Thai politics. The Democrats as a group have been fairly consistently pro-Western, and, although they are not strong enough to threaten the ruling position of the junta, may succeed in inducing somewhat more honest and responsible government.

6. General Phao's once-great influence appears to be broken and the National Police establishment is no longer a separate empire, although Phao may be able to harass the government from exile through his remaining adherents within Thailand. Phibun's power has also declined, but to a lesser extent; he still has considerable following in the country and, in the extremity of a future deadlock in Bangkok, might return as the balancer. The leftist opposition, possible leftist "sleepers" within the other parties, and the residual influence of Pridi (still in exile in Communist China) will continue to represent a potential danger, especially in the event of a future breakdown of political stability or a government shift away from its presently pro-Western alignment.

- 5 -

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

B. Economy and Security Situation

7. Recent events warrant no essential revision of NIE 62-57's analysis of the Thai economy. Basic economic considerations are currently creating no strong popular pressure for domestic or foreign policy change and appear to have little present impact on the central issue of political leadership.

8. Except for Sarit's neutralizing of the National Police and the decline in leftist voting strength, there has been little change in Thailand's military and security situation, as discussed in NIE 62-57.

C. International Orientation

9. The Thai public generally continues to be friendly to the US. More important, Thailand's leaders continue to assess Thailand's national interests as being best served by alignment with the West. Certain members of the new cabinet will bear careful watching because of past connections or attitudes, most notably Praphat, Sukit, and three of the Ministers Without Portfolio. Nevertheless, Thailand's adherence to its pro-Western alignment appears somewhat stronger at the moment than it did six months ago. Earlier footsy on the part of top officials with the Chinese Communists has not to our knowledge been

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

resumed to any degree since the departure of Phibun and Phao. Pote and Thanom have not continued Phibun's practice of justifying certain moves by reference to regard for leftist influence in Bangkok. Lastly, Sarit has explicitly announced Thailand's firm support of an anti-Communist and pro-SEATO course, as has Thanom in his public statements since becoming Premier.

10. Nevertheless, while alignment with the West seems firm for the near future, Thailand will continue, as it has in the past, to be sensitive to the power balance in Southeast Asia. We believe that Thai leaders will consider Western influence in the area as a desirable counterweight to the presence of Communist China. However, if Communist strength were to increase greatly in Laos or in other neighboring areas, Thai leaders would become seriously concerned, and would almost certainly put out feelers towards the Communist side, while continuing to press for increased Western support.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

SHERMAN KENT
Assistant Director
National Estimates

- 7 -

~~SECRET~~